

19th Century American Poet: Ezra Pound



[Ezra Pound](#) was one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. However, his life began in the 19th century, and his early influences were shaped by that period. Though most of his poetic work belongs to the modernist movement of the early 20th century, it is important to understand his 19th-century background. This article explores his early life, poetic style, key influences, and compares him with other [American poets](#) of the 19th century. The aim is to examine how the century of his birth helped shape the revolutionary voice he became.

Early Life in the 19th Century

Ezra Pound was born on October 30, 1885, in Hailey, Idaho Territory. At that time, the American West was still being settled. His father, [Homer](#) Loomis Pound, worked for the U.S. Mint. His mother, Isabel Weston, came from a family with colonial roots. This background connected Ezra Pound with both the expansion of America and its early traditions.

When Ezra was a young boy, his family moved to Pennsylvania. He received a good education and was exposed to literature from an early age. He studied languages and poetry at the University of Pennsylvania and later at Hamilton College. He became especially interested in classical literature and Romance languages. These interests would later play a major role in his poetry.

Although he was born in the 19th century, Pound's poetic development occurred mainly in the early 20th century. Still, the spirit of the 19th century, with its grand poetic forms and romantic ideals, remained a part of his foundation.

American Poetry in the 19th Century

To understand Ezra Pound's place in [American poetry](#), it is necessary to consider the general trends of 19th-century American literature. The 19th century saw the rise of important poets such as:

Walt Whitman, who celebrated the individual and democracy.

Emily Dickinson, who explored inner life in short, powerful poems.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who used traditional meter and narrative.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who merged poetry with philosophy.

Each of these poets had a distinct style. They reflected the values and concerns of their time. Many dealt with nature, the soul, the American experience, and universal questions.

Compared to them, Ezra Pound's approach was very different. He moved away from traditional American themes and embraced internationalism. However, he could not have done this without the solid foundation provided by these earlier poets.

Pound's Departure from 19th-Century Styles

Ezra Pound did not follow the same path as most 19th-century American poets. He rejected the traditional forms, especially the strict meter and rhyme schemes of poets like Longfellow and Bryant. He believed that poetry needed a new direction.

Pound once said, “Make it new.” This phrase became a slogan for modernist poetry. While 19th-century poets often wrote long narrative poems or meditations on life, Pound focused on precision, image, and rhythm.

He believed poetry should be as clear and sharp as a painting or piece of music. For this reason, he began experimenting with free verse and a method he called “imagism.”

Imagism and Early Innovation

Imagism was a literary movement that began in the early 20th century. Pound was one of its leaders. The movement encouraged poets to:

Use direct language.

Avoid unnecessary words.

Create clear, precise images.

One of Pound’s most famous early poems is *In a Station of the Metro* (1913). It is only two lines long:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

This poem shows the core of imagism. It uses clear images and very few words. There is no rhyme or meter. Yet it is very powerful.

Although this work came after the 19th century, the intellectual curiosity and poetic education that made it possible were rooted in Pound’s 19th-century background.

Pound’s Global Perspective

Most 19th-century American poets focused on the American landscape, identity, or philosophy. Pound, in contrast, looked outward. He spent much of his life in Europe. He studied Chinese, Greek, Latin, and Italian literature. He translated foreign texts and often used ancient sources as models.

This international outlook set him apart from poets like Whitman and Dickinson. Where Whitman embraced the self and American democracy, Pound explored European history and Asian poetry. Where Dickinson withdrew into private themes, Pound engaged with world culture and politics.

His broad vision came, in part, from his 19th-century education. At the time, classical training was highly valued. Pound’s grounding in

Latin and Greek allowed him to read ancient works in the original language. This shaped his understanding of poetry as something ancient, global, and eternal.

Influence of Walt Whitman

Although Pound often criticized the poetry of the past, he respected Walt Whitman. He once wrote a poem titled *A Pact* in which he acknowledged Whitman's greatness:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
I have detested you long enough.
I see that you are old and I am young...

In this poem, Pound admits he was wrong to reject Whitman. He now sees Whitman as a path-maker, someone who made it possible for new poets to find their voice. Whitman broke with European styles and helped create a unique American voice. Pound respected that spirit, even if he did not share Whitman's methods.

Pound and Emily Dickinson

Pound had little in common with Emily Dickinson's style. Dickinson's poems are short, introspective, and often mysterious. She used dashes and capital letters in strange ways. Pound's poems, especially later in his career, were more public and historical.

However, both shared an interest in the power of few words. They both believed that poetry should be compact and meaningful. Dickinson's economy of language may have influenced Pound's belief in the image and the line.

Dickinson rarely left her home, while Pound traveled across the world. Yet they both sought to understand human experience through language.

Longfellow and the Tradition Pound Rejected

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most famous American [poet](#) of the 19th century. He used traditional meters, rhyme, and narrative forms. His poems were clear and often

moralistic. Works like *The Song of Hiawatha* and Paul Revere's *Ride* were popular in schools and homes.

Pound rejected this style. He believed it was too sentimental and outdated. He criticized Longfellow's poetry as "genteel" and "Victorian." He wanted poetry to be fresh, alive, and modern.

Still, Longfellow helped establish poetry as a respected art form in America. Without poets like him, Pound might not have had the platform he did.

Pound's Literary Contributions

Pound was more than just a poet. He was also an editor, critic, and promoter of other writers. He helped launch the careers of:

T.S. Eliot, by editing *The Waste Land*.

James Joyce, by promoting *Ulysses*.

Robert Frost, by publishing his early poems in England.

His editorial work was groundbreaking. He believed in shaping poetry with care. He cut lines, improved rhythm, and made suggestions. Many great modernist works owe their form to Pound's vision.

This role is very different from the 19th-century poet as a solitary figure. Pound was part of a literary community. He shaped the future of poetry by working with others.

The Cantos and Late Work

Ezra Pound's most ambitious project was *The Cantos*, a long, unfinished poem he worked on for over 50 years. It mixed history, philosophy, personal stories, and political ideas. It was influenced by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and ancient Chinese texts.

The Cantos are difficult to read. They jump between languages and references. But they represent Pound's lifelong search for order and beauty in a complex world.

This massive project is different from anything written in the 19th century. Longfellow wrote epic poems, but they were clear and structured. Pound's work was chaotic and experimental. Yet both poets believed in the power of the epic to capture human truth.

Political Controversy

In his later life, Pound became involved in politics. He supported Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini and made radio broadcasts during World War II. These actions led to his arrest and confinement in a mental hospital in the United States.

This part of his life is troubling. It raises questions about the connection between art and morality. Pound's political views were extreme, but his influence on poetry remains important.

Many 19th-century poets also dealt with politics. Whitman supported the Union during the Civil War. Emerson promoted abolition. However, their messages were based on human freedom and democracy. Pound's political path was much darker.

Pound's Legacy

Ezra Pound is one of the most important figures in modernist poetry. His ideas changed the way people thought about verse. He believed in:

The power of the image.

The importance of sound and rhythm.

The need to connect with ancient texts.

The value of editing and collaboration.

Although he was born in the 19th century, his poetry belongs to the 20th. Still, the education, culture, and poets of the 19th century shaped his early mind.

He argued with the past, but he never ignored it. He read Whitman, rejected Longfellow, and found inspiration in classical poets. He helped move American poetry into a new era.

Conclusion

Ezra Pound was a child of the 19th century but a leader of the 20th. His poetry broke with tradition but also grew from it. He challenged the old forms, promoted the new, and sought beauty in many cultures.

Compared with other 19th-century American poets, Pound is unique. He did not celebrate the American spirit like Whitman. He did not write inward like Dickinson. He did not follow traditional form like Longfellow. Yet he learned from all of them.

Pound's early life, education, and reading came from the 19th century. These experiences gave him the tools he needed to

reshape poetry. His story reminds us that even revolutionaries come from tradition.

Through his work, Ezra Pound bridged the past and the future of American poetry. His journey began in the 19th century but changed the world of literature forever.